



Growing up with foster siblings: A qualitative exploration of the wellbeing of sons and daughters of foster carers

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ABSTRACT

This research qualitatively explores the unique experiences and wellbeing of nine individuals who are the son or daughter of a foster carer, with a particular focus on support received and positive changes since fostering. Participants were recruited via purposive sampling from Calderdale’s pre-existing support group for sons and daughters of foster carers. The sample comprised of four females and five males, ranging from ten to seventeen years old. They were placed in focus groups of three, and engaged in a number of tasks all of which aimed to create an in-depth group discussion. A rigorous thematic analysis was carried out on the transcripts, and as a result, three main themes emerged: support, anxiety and value of helping others. Future recommendations have been discussed.

KEY WORDS:	THEMATIC ANALYSIS	WELLBEING	SONS AND DAUGHTERS	FOSTERING	EXPERIENCES
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Introduction

Fostering

Children who are unable to live with their birth family are taken into the care of the local authority (LA), who then have the responsibility for the children's upbringing, including where they live and who looks after them (Government Digital Service, 2015). Most children are taken into the care of the LA due to 'a severe family breakdown, serious abuse and neglect' (Walsh and Campbell, 2010:6). Foster care is one of several care options; it offers children a home with alternative family care (Adoption and Foster Care, 2015) and aims to provide some form of normality (Hojer, 2004). Foster carers work in partnership with the LA's, providing high quality care for a foster child in their own family home. All foster carers complete rigorous training before being approved to foster, to ensure they have the correct skills and qualities to look after a child in care (Coram BAAF, 2015).

In the UK, there are 64,000 children who live with almost 55,000 foster families and whilst the number of children entering the LA's care is ever increasing, over 12% of foster families are leaving annually (The Fostering Network, 2016). Thus, previous research has aimed to obtain an understanding of foster families including the factors affecting a successful foster placement, meaning that LA and fostering agencies can work towards maintaining and recruiting suitable foster families. Although many factors contribute to the success of fostering, the present study focuses on the birth children of foster carers, exploring their unique experiences of fostering and how it can affect one's wellbeing. The introduction will continue with an overview of psychological wellbeing, followed by a more specific review of the literature concerning the wellbeing of foster carer's children. This report will use the term 'sons and daughters' to represent:

Those children born to...foster carers...they will see themselves, and be seen by other family members as a full member of the family (The Fostering Network, 2008).

Psychological Wellbeing

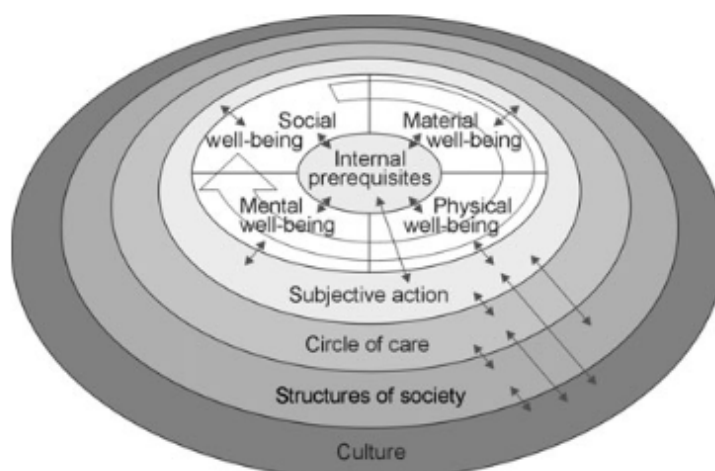


Figure 1. The Structural Model of Child Wellbeing.

The arrows represent interactions between the elements. The orbital arrow represents the interplay between the wellbeing dimensions (Minkkinen, 2013).

The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2016) has defined health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”. Thus, the ‘Structural Model of Child Wellbeing’ (SMCW) (Minkkinen, 2013) embraces the multidimensional construct of wellbeing in its theory, placing physical, mental and social dimensions at the centre. These, along with ‘material wellbeing’ are regarded as being the focal dimensions of wellbeing, all of which interplay with each other. The first outer circle (see Figure 1) is ‘subjective action’, referring to the internal and external activities that are engaged in by the individual, which relates to the eudaimonic perspective that one’s fulfilment in life is from being fully functioning (Ryan and Deci, 2001).

Furthermore, the SMCW proposes there is a ‘societal frame’ of child wellbeing, stemming from the notion and concepts of the ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Similar to the micro-, exo- and macro-systems identified by Bronfenbrenner (1979), the SMCW suggests that a child’s wellbeing is affected by the ‘circle of care’, the ‘structures of society’ and ‘culture’ which reflects the environmental and societal prerequisites of wellbeing. The innermost societal circle is ‘circle of care’ referring to persons giving physical, cognitive, emotional and material support. The ‘structures of society’ comprises the second circle of the societal frame, which refers to the family, the social care system, and education, which have both indirect and direct influences on a child’s wellbeing. Lastly, the outermost circle reflects ‘the fact that culture frames all kinds of human and societal activity’ (Minkkinen, 2013:555).

Previous literature regarding the impact of fostering on sons and daughters

The transformation in becoming a foster family is vast; it changes the family structure, relationships within the family and everyday life (Sutton and Stack, 2013). This must be acknowledged when exploring the fostering family as according to Bronfenbrenner (1979) the needs of one member of the family are directly affected by those of other members. However, research regarding fostering is generally based on the experiences of foster parents and the foster children themselves, meaning that the needs of sons and daughters of foster carers are overlooked (The Fostering Network, 2008). This is surprising considering there is a significant correlation between their presence and the failure of a foster placement (Farmer et al., 2004). Previously sons and daughters have been seen as ‘receivers of care’ rather than potential carers (Hojer et al., 2013), however according to Martin (1993) ‘it’s not just parent’s who foster, it’s the whole family’ (Martin, 1993:17). Hence, it is important that current research acknowledges that sons and daughters are social agents within a fostering family and perhaps requires similar training and support to what is received by foster carers (Hojer et al., 2013).

Parents are often concerned about the effects fostering will have on their sons and daughters, which can often dissuade many from becoming foster carers in the first place (Sinclair, 2005) and is often a common reason why foster carers give up (Younes and Harp, 2007). However, generally foster carers suggest that fostering teaches their sons and daughters more about life than they ever could have taught

themselves (Younes and Harp, 2007). Hojer (2004) explains this as being a 'lesson of empathy', implying that fostering teaches sons and daughters about the misfortunes of others, which builds their caring and empathetic skills. Yet, sometimes learning about foster children's past and hardships is difficult for sons and daughters of foster carers to deal with, for example Hojer (2001) reported them feeling 'angry', 'traumatised' and 'invisible'. Pugh (1996) terms this as a 'loss of innocence'. Hojer (2001) further stated that when sons and daughters are aware of their foster siblings 'bigger problems', they have to learn to be considerate and stand back whilst the foster child becomes their parents' priority.

Hojer's (2001) study, generated two themes expressing negative fostering experiences; these being 'reduced parent-child time', as the foster child 'absorbed' majority of the attention and 'changed atmosphere at home' because of the foster child adjusting to the family norms and rules. According to the SMCW, lack of parental support from the 'circle of care' can negatively affect a child's wellbeing (Minkinen, 2013). However, Hojer's (2001) research only included the views of foster carers and research has documented that foster carers' perceptions are not always the same as their sons and daughters (Nuske, 2004). Therefore, this present study builds on fostering literature yet from the perspective of sons and daughters themselves. When foster carers' children have been interviewed, they have reported experiences of violent outbursts, meaning they are the recipients of aggressive acts or they witness their possessions and family members being damaged or hurt (Twigg and Swan, 2007; Watson and Jones, 2002). Watson and Jones (2002) argues that the LA's tend to overlook this impact on the sons and daughters of foster carers, and suggests:

Had similar treatment been...experienced by a...[foster child] it could be subject to a planning meeting, review or a child protection conference (Watson and Jones, 2002:54)

In a recent study, Duffy (2013) interviewed eight sons and daughters of foster carers, all of which presented altruistic answers when asked about positive fostering experiences. The sons and daughters perceived themselves as being involved in caring for the foster child and spoke about the satisfaction it gave them. Duffy (2013) found that participants displayed an empathetic attitude towards others, for example, offering concerns about their parents and posing excuses to explain why foster children sometimes have unwanted behaviour. Duffy's (2013) study was small scale and therefore may not be representative of all sons and daughters of foster carers. Furthermore, only participants over 18 years old were interviewed, thus to increase the validity of these findings, this present study included the views of sons and daughters under the age of 18 years. Whilst the representativeness of Duffy's (2013) study is questionable, the results seem to be in line with other research (Pugh, 1996; Hojer, 2007; Sutton and Stack, 2013). Although, Sutton and Stack (2013) and Hojer (2007) additionally found that sons and daughters of foster carers mentioned they had more family outings and holidays since fostering and felt proud of their fostering journey. This relates to the 'subjective action' in the SMCW, suggesting that the activities they engage in and fostering as a whole helps to fulfil their life.

In the largest meta-analytic review regarding the 'impact of fostering on foster carers' children' (Hojer et al., 2013), 'altruism' is highlighted as a prominent theme across majority of the literature. Social identity theory proposes "Individuals develop altruism

through internalising societal norms, one of which would be the responsibility to help those less fortunate than themselves” (Bandura, 1987:56). In Hojer and colleagues (2013) review, other themes of positive experiences emerged, for example, ‘making friends’, ‘feeling part of a team’ and ‘becoming more caring and empathetic’. Conversely, themes of negative experiences were also reported across the literature, these being ‘easing the burden on parents’, ‘sharing belongings, space and parents’ time’, and ‘dealing with behaviour difficulties’ (Spears and Cross, 2003; Younes and Harp, 2007). Nuske (2004) describes this mixture of positive and negative impacts as ‘living within a contradictory experience’. Still, research and practice has not acknowledged the impact of fostering on the lives of sons and daughters of foster carers enough, and is a concern internationally (Twigg and Swan, 2007).

In one of the few studies conducted in the UK, Watson and Jones (2002) found that sons and daughters spoke negatively about fostering because the lack of support from the LA. In Watson and Jones (2002) study ‘The impact of fostering on foster carers’ own children’, 112 sons and daughters completed a questionnaire in which half of them reported concerns about the attitude of the social workers, they commented that social workers fail to notice their point of view and did not ask how they felt. Due to this lack of support from social workers, some participants stated that they would not be foster carers in the future. These findings were echoed in more recent research; Noble-Carr and colleagues (2014) reported that sons and daughters spoke about social workers in a negative manner, suggesting that the LA does not give them enough recognition for what they have to deal with. Across literature, only those who were involved in a ‘sons and daughters of foster carers’ support group felt supported and listened to, as they were able to understand their experiences and help them manage (Watson and Jones, 2002; Spears and Cross, 2003). Being part of a sons and daughters group provides an individual with a sense of social identity (Turner, 1982), which can enhance one’s self esteem and sense of worth, thus impacting on their wellbeing (Haslam et al., 2009). This is confirmed in the ‘social wellbeing’ dimension in the SMCW.

Present study

After reviewing existing literature regarding fostering, there is a large proportion of international research, thus leaving an evident gap for further research to be conducted in the UK. Other researchers have advocated further research to explore the impact of fostering on sons and daughters of foster carers is needed (Osborn et al, 2007) to demonstrate how they can be supported (Hojer et al., 2013), which is an issue this present study aimed to address. A significant amount of research has documented how negative effects of fostering on sons and daughters of foster carers can cause foster families to leave the system. Therefore, this study aims to raise awareness of both positive and negative experiences, hence the research aim and questions. The main aim of this present research was to explore the psychological wellbeing of sons and daughters of foster carers.

Research Questions

1. How have the changes involved in fostering positively influenced the psychological wellbeing of sons and daughters of foster carers?

2. How has the support of the social care system affected the psychological wellbeing of sons and daughters of foster carers?
3. How has fostering impacted the relationship between the sons and daughters and their parents, and how has this affected their wellbeing?

Methodology

Similar to previous research within this field, this present study made use of a qualitative research design. An Interpretivists' epistemological position was adopted due to the view that how we understand phenomena must be through 'interpreting the social world by how individuals themselves experience it' (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003:20). In accordance with the paradigm, the current research acknowledges that that everyone's experiences of fostering will be different. Thus, the use of qualitative research methods allowed the researcher to explore inner unique experiences of participants rather than simply test variables (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants with 'most information on the characteristic of interest' (Guarte and Barrios, 2007:277). In this instance, being a son or daughter of a foster carer is the characteristic of interest, therefore a sample of nine participants were purposively recruited from a pre-existing group of 'sons and daughters of foster carers'. The sample comprised of four females and five males, ranging from ten to seventeen years old, which was due to convenience only.

After the application for ethics approval was accepted, the researcher obtained permission to contact the sons and daughters from the foster carer that runs the group. Then, participants were emailed an invitation to partake in the research, which included an information sheet; hence were able to gain a full understanding of what was expected of their participation, the research aims and the procedure. Given the existing relationship between the researcher and the participants, it was clarified that there was no obligation to take part. Since all participants are under 18 years, written consent was obtained from participants themselves and also their parents. Participants were ensured anonymity through the use of pseudonyms.

Data Collection

A quiet and private room was prearranged to collect data. The researcher specifically selected the room where the pre-existing group normally meet to offer familiarity and comfort to the participants (King and Horrocks, 2010). Data was collected via three focus groups; each of these included only three participants to encourage equal participation in the discussion, consequently, allowing a considerable number of ideas to be generated within the time limit (Prince and Davies, 2001). The duration of each focus group was approximately one hour, which is agreed among researchers as the maximum duration for research involving children (Millward, 2012). The focus group discussions were digitally recorded and uploaded, stored and transcribed on a password-protected computer that only the researcher had access to.

Due to the research involving children, focus groups were employed to offer a safe environment where participants can feel comfortable sharing ideas, beliefs and

attitudes, in the company of individuals with the same background (Madriz, 2003). Moreover, as the sample was taken from a pre-existing group, it aimed to eliminate the fear of being judged by other individuals (Hennin, 2007). Group interviews allowed for discussion between participants, thus providing alternative opportunities for new concepts to emerge and the researcher was able to appreciate how participants see their own reality (Ivanoff and Hultberg, 2006), which may not have been possible in a standard individual interview (Liamputtong, 2011). Due to the researcher only having access to a small sample and having limited amount of time, focus groups were considered to be an efficient way of producing a large amount of information and opinions (Hines, 2000; Masadeh, 2012).

Procedure

Focus groups within this study were shaped by three tasks, which aimed to make participants feel less intimidated and to keep them involved in sharing personal experiences and opinions. The schedule was used in all three focus groups; yet as part of qualitative research there was room for flexibility and difference between focus groups (Silverman, 2005).

First, was a 'paper talk' exercise, in which the use of spider diagrams was used to encourage participants to express how they felt about fostering in general. Two broad questions were asked, these were: 'How does it feel knowing you are part of a fostering family?' and 'How does it feel living in a fostering family?'. Second, each child was presented with a set of 13 cards. Each card represented something that may have changed for them since living in a fostering family, for example, meal times, holidays, and worry levels. Participants were encouraged to put the cards in order in terms of what has changed the most in their family (1 being the biggest change, 13 being the smallest change). Participants had the chance to discuss the changes with the rest of the group and think about other changes they have encountered since being a part of a fostering family. The researcher was particularly interested in anything that has changed in a positive way, thus participants were asked to state whether their changes have been positive or negative for themselves and their family. Third, the researcher asked a set of questions to guide an in-depth discussion with the participants. Some of these questions were as follows: 'how have relationships within your own family home changed?', 'what kind of responsibilities have you gained since you have been a part of a fostering family?' and 'have you been appropriately supported by the LA's?'.

Before each task, the researcher ensured participants were willing to continue with the study and informed them they did not have to participate in any task if they did not wish to, and could have withdrawn at any point during the study. Finally, parents, sons and daughters were appropriately debriefed at the end of the study. It was agreed that all documentation and data would be destroyed on the completion of the researchers degree.

Data Analysis

As suggested by Landridge (2004), the researcher transcribed the digitally recorded data themselves, which allowed the researcher to become closely familiar with the data. Poland's (2002) basic transcription system was followed and whilst the researcher repeatedly listened and read the data, they were able to 'obtain the sense of the whole' (Polit and Beck, 2004). Thematic analysis was conducted, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process. Themes that were selected were:

...recurrent and distinctive features of participants accounts, characterising particular perceptions and/or experiences, which the researcher... [saw] as relevant to the research question (King and Horrocks, 2010:150).

The six-phase process that was completed is as follows: (1) the researcher became familiar with the data, (2) initial codes were generated, (3) initial search for themes, (4) the themes were reviewed, (5) the themes were defined and finalised, (6) the report was produced.

Thematic analysis was chosen for this research design to present sons and daughters' stories and experiences of fostering as 'accurately and comprehensively as possible' (Guest et al., 2012:15). Using thematic analysis has allowed the researcher to summarise the key features of the data relating to the wellbeing of sons and daughters of foster carers, therefore providing a 'thick description' of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis has enabled the researcher to highlight similarities between the participant's experiences; furthermore it has facilitated the discovery of unanticipated insights and concepts, thus increasing the understanding of the wellbeing of foster carer's sons and daughters (Krippendorff, 2004).

Analysis and Discussion

This study sought to gain insight into the wellbeing of sons and daughters of foster carers, through exploring their unique experiences. After a rigorous thematic analysis was carried out, three main themes were identified: 1) support, 2) anxiety and 2) value of helping others. Table 1 illustrates the main themes along with the sub-themes chosen. Then, this section will provide a comprehensive discussion of the themes providing quotes from the participants and with relation to the aforementioned literature.

Table 1. A summary of the main themes and sub-themes

Main Themes	Sub-themes
Support	Informal Support Formal Support
Anxiety	
Value of Helping Others	
<u>Support</u>	

According to the SMCW, supportive relationships within family, friendships, school and the social care system have both direct and indirect influences on a child's wellbeing. This was evident in the participants' responses and two types of support appeared prominent in how they would cope with their fostering journey. Formal support refers to the help from social workers and the school, whereas informal support signifies help from peers, parents and in this instance other families who foster (Farmer, Moyers and Lipscombe, 2004).

Formal Support

In accordance with previous research (Watson and Jones, 2002; Noble-Carr et al., 2014), all participants reported a lack of support from social workers, with majority quoting that social workers only speak with their parents and the foster child. Research indicates that sons and daughters of foster carers want to be recognised and acknowledged for their caring capacity (Noble-Carr et al., 2014; Twigg and Swan, 2007), yet social workers fail to see them as active agents in the fostering family (Hojer et al., 2013). Similarly, participants in this present study portray social workers in a negative manner, suggesting their experiences in this regard were disappointing. For example, one participant said "I don't think we have ever had a social worker that has...ever asked me any questions about fostering" (FG1, 492-494) and continued to state "...they are not really bothered about us" (FG1, 432-433).

These feelings that social workers are only concerned about parents and foster children can allow them to feel alienated, consequently impacting their sense of belonging (Twigg and Swan, 2007). This failure of social workers to recognise their contributions was expressed among all participants, they even reported that social workers don't understand what they are going through and fail to empathise with their negative experiences. One participant said, "I feel like she is just there to fill in her paperwork" (FG3, 394-395). Therefore these findings contribute to the existing recommendation that social workers should spend more time working with foster carers' children, just simply recognising their efforts and presenting themselves as wanting to listen to the stories of fostering (Watson and Jones 2002, Hojer et al., 2006).

Most participants commented on how social workers only spoke to them at the beginning of the fostering process to inform them about fostering, one participant said:

When you get told about fostering...[social workers] make it seem like this amazing thing giving young children these opportunities. But you just think are these social workers just saying this so that they can get people to do it because it is nothing like they said it is. (FG1, 473-477)

This, along with previous research (Spears and Cross, 2003; Younes and Harp, 2007), shows that from the beginning sons and daughters are uninformed about fostering and lack the appropriate support to deal with their experiences. Hence, like Hojer et al (2013) suggested, sons and daughters should have the opportunity to engage in similar training to foster carers (Hojer et al., 2013), to assist them in the provision of care they provide, rather than simply telling children it is a 'good thing'.

Participants also spoke about the lack of support they received from school:

No one at school understands... they don't know what we have to put up with when we get home, like constant arguing and being punched. (FG2, 242-245)

... no one even notices and no one even cares when you tell them. They will say 'well done' like it sounds ideal. (FG2, 240-241)

Surprisingly, there is a lack of research concerning sons and daughters of foster carers and the support they receive from school. However, according to the SMCW, school is a structure in society that offers a child with physical, cognitive and emotional support, directly influencing a child's wellbeing (Minkinen, 2013). Similarly, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory proposes that at all levels, the relationships and connections between the people and systems that make up our communities are important in providing support and opportunities, that allow individuals to be successful (Bouffard and Weiss, 2008). Accordingly, it suggests this lack of recognition and support by the school in the fostering process, poses a significant threat to the wellbeing of sons and daughters of foster carers.

Social Support

Participants reported 'sharing parents' time' as a negative change since fostering, which echoes previous literature (Hojer 2007; Spears and Cross, 2003). They valued the time they had with their parents without their foster sibling being present, and the majority commented that they needed more 'time off' from fostering. One participant said: "...Sometimes I feel like we need a break and time to regroup as a family" (FG2, 373-374). Likewise, in Hojer et al's (2013) meta-analysis, sharing parents' time was found to be one of the most tangible impacts on sons and daughters lives when they begin fostering. As Hojer (2001) found, it was evident that participants sometimes had to stand back as their foster sibling had become their parents' priority:

I do find it hard that the attention has gone from me... I am now just expected to get on with stuff when sometimes I need that extra help and support. (FG1, 73-80)

Contrastingly, one study by Denuwelaere and Bracke (2007) found that sons and daughters of foster carers perceived themselves as receiving the same amount of their parent's time and support as their foster siblings. Yet, in this present study one participant said, "...It feels like me and my brother against my mum, dad and the foster child...it's frustrating" (FG3, 260-261). Nonetheless, generally the participants suggested that it was normal and that they were "used to it now" (FG1, 73). They offered a level of understanding of why they had to stand back, suggesting that foster children need more time and attention, mirroring the findings of Hojer (2001).

...They have more needs than us and my parents need to spend more time with them to make them feel like they have a family. (FG1, 271-273)

As suggested by Martin (1993, cited in Thompson and McPherson, 2011), this reflects 'premature growing up', as the sons and daughters of foster carers learn to become independent whilst their foster sibling receives the attention.

Participants consistently reported the sons and daughters support group as the best form of support, due to the shared understanding between them. One participant expressed "It is easier talking to people at the sons and daughters group because they are the only people that understand" (FG2, 255-256). This is coherent with the findings of Watson and Jones (2002) and Spears and Cross (2003), who reported that only individuals attending support groups felt listened to and it had helped them cope with fostering. In participants responses it was evident that the sons and daughters group helped them to feel some kind of normality, since they were similar to each other. For example:

...It will always feel strange because obviously it is not a normal family but it's good that we can be with other people that know what we are going through and we are not just on our own suffering. (FG1, 119-122)

Until the sons and daughters group, I didn't realise that there was people going through the exact same thing...Everyone there just understands and can relate to what you are going through (FG3, 366-370)

This relates to the social identity theory, in which Turner (1982) suggests that being part of a group provides each member with a sense of social identity. It appears this shared identity has enhanced their sense of worth, as they are able to communicate with individuals who recognise what they are going through (Haslam et al., 2009). There has been no robust evaluations of such support groups, therefore the impact on sons and daughter's wellbeing has not been documented (Hojer et al., 2013). Yet this present study highlights the importance of the group for the participants, they expressed that they want the group to run more often so they don't have to "hold in what's happened" (FG2, 263) for a long period of time.

Anxiety

Furthermore, participants reported they had higher levels of anxiety since they started fostering. They suggested that it was difficult to be out in public with their foster sibling and didn't want to invite their friends over to the house because "most of the time the foster child will cause a scene" (FG2, 288). One participant said:

You are so worried when the conflict will start again. Foster children have like a twig personality, they try to be good but then suddenly just snap and then decide they hate you. (FG1, 192-194)

Other research has also recognised that sons and daughters experience a change in the family atmosphere and have to deal with foster siblings' behavioural difficulties (Hojer et al, 2013). Hojer (2004) explains this as foster siblings struggling to adapt to the new family rules, suggesting that they do not know how to behave in familial situations because of their previous experiences. Participants were aware of this, yet still expressed their frustration as they spoke about their foster siblings continuously ruining family meals and holidays.

Additionally, participants were worried about the safety of themselves and their property and expressed a deeper concern regarding their parents and their birth siblings experiencing physical harm:

I had never had anxiety before we started fostering. Once...I was so scared that my foster sibling was going to stab my mum. (FG1, 302-304)

I worry about my younger birth sibling because my foster sibling is...strong so I know that she could hurt him. (FG2, 156-158)

Previous research is coherent with these findings; Twigg and Swann (2007) also reported sons and daughters feared for their parents safety when they were left alone with a challenging foster child. Swan (2002) suggests that this exposure to aggressive behaviour has a negative impact on the sons and daughters of foster carers, for example, feeling disturbed and angry (Hojer, 2004). Few participants even reported that they have had to leave the family home until things had calmed down. Whilst it seems fostering has caused sons and daughters to worry more, Sinclair (2004) argues that it teaches them how to behave and exercise tolerance.

Value of Helping Others

It is evident from the research findings that all participants were satisfied from caring for their foster sibling, because they were in need of help. One participant commented:

Their parents are meant to be the ones that they can trust, but if they are hitting them and abusing them then people like us need to care for them. It makes me want to help them. (FG1, 172-175)

Furthermore, this demonstrates how participants regularly looked at things from the viewpoint of their foster sibling, reflecting an altruistic attribute. This altruism has been highlighted as a prominent theme in other research (Duffy, 2013; Hojer et al., 2013). Interestingly the findings are similar to Duffy (2013) who interviewed participants over 18 years old, suggesting this value of helping others is a positive experience of fostering irrespective of the sons and daughters age. As with previous findings (Duffy, 2013; Sutton and Stack, 2013), the participants tone in which they spoke about their foster siblings was one of concern and care, which reflected maturity beyond their age:

Now that I have seen everything that a foster child goes through and all the stress they experience I can relate to what they are going through and I feel sorry for them. (FG2, 69-71)

This builds on Hojer's (2004) findings, that suggests sons and daughters benefit from fostering through the 'lesson of empathy' that it provides.

Even after speaking about negative experiences of fostering, their maturity was demonstrated when most participants were able to talk about the positive

experiences of fostering and felt pride in themselves and their foster siblings' achievements:

...you get to see the changes in them and that is good...They come with bad habits but then they start to fit in with your family. (FG3, 44-49)

It has been quite a rollercoaster ride, so when you look back and see how well you have actually dealt with it...I feel proud that...I have got through it. (FG1, 460-466)

Sutton and Stack (2013) also reported that sons and daughters felt proud of their fostering journey, particularly when positive outcomes were achieved. Swan (2002) suggests that this positive influence sons and daughters have on foster children, gives them a purpose.

Interestingly, the participants caring attitude extended to their parents. Participants spoke about their parents being determined to make fostering work and because of this they wanted to try and help make it successful. For example, one participant explains: "...my mum just wants foster children to be looked after correct and how children should be" (FG2, 334-335) and states "I wouldn't say that I want to stop fostering because that's what they want to do" (FG2, 345-348). In Hojer et al's (2013) meta-analysis 'easing the burden on parents' was identified as a common theme across literature. Similar to these present findings, the meta-analysis reported that sons and daughters were aware of how important it was for their parents to succeed in fostering; therefore they facilitated fostering to help their parents perform well as foster carers (Twigg and Swan, 2007; Younes and Harp, 2007). This value of helping their foster sibling and their parents helps sons and daughters to feel fulfilled (Minkinen, 2013) and acts as an incentive to continue with fostering regardless of negative experiences (Williams and DeStono, 2008).

Final Discussion

Limitations of this present study

There are limitations to this study in relation to the sample used. Firstly, the sample was small, only comprising of nine participants. Secondly, the participants were recruited from an existing support group for sons and daughters of foster carers, these were families who fostered from the LA, thus experiences may be somewhat different to families who foster from private agencies. Thirdly, all participants had different experiences of fostering in terms of the length of the foster placements, their own age and gender and their foster sibling's age were all different, something which this study has not taken into account, therefore is inconclusive as to whether this diversity could effect a child's wellbeing. Whilst this limitation was unavoidable it raises issues pertaining to representativeness and generalisability. These results may not be representative of all sons and daughters of foster carers in other foster settings. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that participants were being asked to think about retrospective experiences; consequently individual's accounts may have been affected by recall bias. Likewise, participant's responses may have been reconstructed to portray themselves in a favourable and positive manner (Wilson and Ross, 2003), therefore cannot be considered as an objective truth.

Recommendations

LA's must recognise the vital role foster carers' children play in the fostering process. Social workers need to recognise that when they are assigned to a foster family, they are working with the whole family unit, thus need to be aware of all family dynamics so they can identify when sons and daughters are in need of extra support. Primarily, sons and daughters merely want recognition for living in this contradictory experience; this will address the concerns regarding belonging. Furthermore, it seems that parents need to spend time alone with the sons and daughters to ensure they receive the rightful amount of support. Most importantly, collaboration between the social workers, parents and school is essential for supporting a child through their fostering experience. Schools need to understand what is going on at home so that they can support sons and daughters in the classroom. Still, further research is needed in the UK to explore the wellbeing of sons and daughters of foster carers. It would be beneficial for future research to use a larger sample and to address the support system of school and the sons and daughters support groups.

Concluding remarks

This research builds on the existing, limited literature regarding the impact of fostering on foster carers' sons and daughters. Whilst it did not replicate the findings of any one study, it has been in line with majority findings. It has shown how support, anxiety and the value of fostering impact the wellbeing of sons and daughters. The young people suggested that they struggle with school not being supportive, as far as the researcher is aware; this is a new finding among literature in this field. Whilst there were differences in terms of foster placements, overall there was a consensus of views. The themes that emerged in this study exposed some of the positive and negative experiences that sons and daughters go through, which have allowed all three-research questions to be answered. This study provides future recommendations that could be advantageous to the success of future foster placements.

Reflexive Analysis

According to Finlay (2002), in order to increase the integrity and trustworthiness of the research, the researcher needs to reflect on their own experiences and the potential impression it may have on the research.

As the researcher, my experience as a daughter of a foster carer introduced me to the mixture of negative and positive experiences sons and daughters of foster carers undergo and the influence on psychological wellbeing. With the lack of research acknowledging the difficulty of fostering, I felt that it was important to promote further awareness for the likes of the LA and foster carers. I believe that fostering is extremely rewarding, yet I understand that the negative experiences of fostering can sometimes lead to foster carers leaving, which in turn leaves some foster children without a home. I am passionate about helping foster children in need, and I hope to prevent foster placement breakdowns by increasing awareness regarding the amount of support sons and daughters of foster carers need.

I was aware that my personal experience could have been manifested in the research and potentially influenced how I interpreted the responses of the participants. However, I feel that my subject positioning was more beneficial as it provided me with an opportunity to delve into the experiences encountered by sons and daughters. Furthermore, as I am a part of the support group, it meant that I had an existing relationship and shared understanding with the participants, meaning that the rapport was already established, thus easing the flow of the discussion. While this allowed me to access personal phenomenon, I also had to take additional precaution that the dual relationship did not impair professional objectivity or lead to conflicts of interest with the participants. The questions that were asked may have been biased, as they were based on my personal experiences of fostering, thus pointed towards themes I expected to find, which in fact were upheld. As my family foster a young person long-term, I have never experienced multiple foster placements, therefore did not emphasise 'loss of a foster sibling' as being a negative experience, which has been prominent in previous research. After undertaking this research, I am more appreciative of others' experiences and how difficult some foster placements can be.

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